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ABSTRACT

The state of adult literacy programs, including the Chicago Public Library Literacy Initiative, is described. After the Vietnam War, Congress passed adult education legislation, and Laubach Literacy Action and Literacy Volunteers of America became the nation's largest network of literacy providers. These and other literacy programs have problems: various interpretations for the very concept of literacy; the difference between changing individual people versus changing society; philosophical assumptions of publicly-funded programs. These problems illustrate the need for bottom-up, or community-based, programs and projects, which are aligned with the needs of the neighborhoods, regions, or populations which they serve. For example, the Chicago Public Library Literacy Initiative reinvented itself in order to appeal to underschooled Chicagoans. The Initiative focuses on word-reading skills development as a strategy to serve hard-to-reach populations, and helps its participants to understand the social constructs of their communities. The library established learning centers where community residents can receive help on issues with which they needed assistance. Instead of a structured learning environment, the literacy staff impart a wide range of basic academic skills. The Literacy Initiative functions as a broker of data, skills, and information between unskilled and skilled persons, agencies, and institutions, and depends not only upon the 80-branch libraries throughout the city but also upon community organizations and agencies. (MAS)

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ON LEARNING TO (UN)LEARN FOR A BETTER LIFE:
Some Cursory Library Literacy Remarks

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"It took almost my entire life for me to realize that I had learned things that should not have been learned at all because those very things kept me down in life. For instance, in the course of my first three decades, I was led to believe that I was not smart enough and that most certainly I would not amount to anything of much value in life. For one thing, I was just a woman; for another, I was no more than a peasant. Deliberately or not, I was taught by my own family, church, school and society that I was going to be a failure in life. Unknowingly to ensure the validity of such a prophecy, I learned to believe what I had been taught. Victim of such a learning, I became a failure in many projects and initiatives that I did or tried to do. Then, one day I started reflecting about those things and the more I reflected, the more some of them did not make much sense to me anymore. I had been taught to be my worse enemy and, being the good daughter, the good sister, the good woman, the good wife that I had been taught and learned to be, only then nearly forty years later it had become clear to me that I had to learn to unlearn a great deal of things that had cost me so much pain and so many years of discipline, energy, dedication and efforts to learn."

Olivia Flores-Godinez, a single mother of five, doing popular education in Chicago's Humboldt Park area through Universidad Popular, a community-based organization. April 05, 1995.

ON LEARNING TO (UN)LEARN FOR A BETTER LIFE

By Elio DeArrudah

Looking Back

There was a time in the history of this society when post-secondary education was a privilege that only a rather small fraction of its population could afford. For the most part, education was a concept interchangeable with the acquisition of reading skills. Given the simplicity of those days' society, one did not need more than very few years of schooling to master whatever academic, technical, career or vocational skills the existing jobs were requiring from its citizenry. Furthermore, Native Americans, Blacks and other subgroups were not supposed to be introduced to the world of education or reading. Because neither bookstores nor libraries were widespread enough, the Bible and the farmers' almanacs were the two most sought and read publications. Understandably, a lot more people than now were living in rural areas in those days carrying out some sort of agricultural chores. Newspapers or magazines, if any, existed basically to disseminate news and information once or twice a week through their very few and spartan pages. More than merely "reading for pleasure", literate people did most of their readings for technical or trade purposes; other than that, it was to "save their souls" by reading the "Lord's words."

Being perceived as subhumans or not fully humans, members of such distinct subgroups in this society were not expected to master enough academic, vocational, technical or career education to save either this life by getting decent jobs or the next by reading the so-termed holy scriptures: All things considered, these subgroups' sole purpose in life was to serve the dominant segments of

society. This being the picture, really there was not a concerted effort to treat everybody in the same way. The letter of the covenants, constitutions or laws of the land only in theory applied to everybody; the "nobodies" of society were not necessarily locked out of the system, but their opportunities to succeed in life definitely were not as plenty as those for the "somebodies" of the occasion.

Even as late as the last century, a lot more people than today were living in rural areas carrying out agricultural activities of one kind or another through their large families. Incidentally, the institution of family was healthy enough back then to insure the survival and success of a lot more people than nowadays, when government, after breaking the family structure, has been playing a growing number of family roles. At the same time, the bulk of city dwellers were being absorbed by some combination of unskilled or low-skilled jobs. In such a scenario, not necessarily elementary but definitely secondary schooling tended to be a luxury to too many people. Paradoxically enough, as we moved from one war to the next (most especially the civil and the world ones), the pace of change increased almost overnight. Women, Blacks, Native Americans, Asians, Latins and other subgroups gradually sought to be treated as full human beings with full human rights. At the same time that many problems were solved through the mere recognition of such a reality, many other challenging situations automatically came to light. After all, the reservoir of resources was not as unlimited as it was once believed. Therefore, new mechanisms had to be developed to select who now was going to be the "full" human beings of the new society.

The assumption, at the time, was that only full humans could be fully functional in society and that only education could drill functionality into one's life. From such an understanding of education to the implementation of it, however, there was quite a way to go. In fact, only with the growing complexity in the

workplace and society, families started developing the idea of sending out their "prime members" for further training or continuing education. Because subgroups' raisons d'etre had been to serve the dominant segments of society more so than to serve themselves, their families usually were in no position to send their offsprings away for secondary or higher learning. Actually, whenever they went away was to fetch quick means to rescue the family from some sort of economic hardship caused by flood, drought, fire, arson, tornado or the like. A few more wars (WWII, Korea, Vietnam, etc.) came along exacerbating the pace of change in society and, consequently, forcing even grown-ups to educate themselves to cope with the many changes. Because typically the people who were drafted to go to the battlefields were not rich, they tended to lack the ability to pay for their own training and education. This phenomenon in itself forced society, once those wars were over and the veterans were back home, to come up with a series of instruments such as student loans, scholarships, financial aids, fellowships, etc., etc. plus a wide range of programs to accommodate those whose deficits in education and income seemingly had been hindering their ability to function smoothly in society. As a symbol of the nation's gratitude toward the many thousands of Bill Reads who had been brave enough to tramp across Normandy, President Franklin D. Roosevelt hailed Public Law 346 or the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 which became known as the GI Bill. Essentially this Act made possible for a lot low-income citizens to have access to college education and home ownership. As a consequence of it, the nation's poor learned to look forward to wars as their best hopes to eventually "make it" in this society, ironically enough.

While education in the turn of the century meant mostly elementary education, by WWII it began to mean secondary education. As time went by, " to get my G.E.D." gradually became the personal goal of very many people.

However, by the time that the Vietnam War rolled into the picture, post-secondary education was what necessary for one to become functional in society without having to die for it in some far away places. To accommodate the aspirations of an increasing set of families and individuals with higher income, post-secondary education programs and institutions such as community colleges started to appear all over the country. While the better-off families would send their "children" out of town or state to a "real college experience" or university, others would settle for local community college classes and programs. In an effort to balance off or equalize this structural problem in this society, plenty of governmental programs were established to assist those that could not get any help from their own families. By the mid- 1960s, interestingly enough, college admission had become one of the several ways used by the better-off families to stir their children away from the war fronts in Southeast Asia. Those unable to break into post-secondary education circles had not much choice but to go to defend US interests overseas. Only upon their returns, they could -- if they still had kept enough of their hearts, limbs and minds together -- start thinking of going for further education.

With the transfer of technological knowledge from weaponry to plowshares, agriculture became agribusiness and continuing waves of people kept on moving to the cities. Without the benefit of elementary (WWI), secondary (WWII) or post-secondary (Korea, Vietnam) education, however, too many of them could not go anywhere in their post-elementary or secondary education pursuits. It was then that a plethora of adult basic education, with strong literacy blending, began to appear. Congress passed adult education legislation and, shortly after, the Laubachs started bringing home some of their church-based international literacy experiences. Before long, Laubach Literacy Action, Inc. (LLA), became the nation's largest network of literacy providers followed very closely by Literacy Volunteers of

America, Inc. (LVA). Both these trend-setting networks, however, started off their literacy efforts in this country overwhelmingly with volunteers whereas much of the adult literacy education dollars were being earmarked for school districts and community colleges. Not being able to access the bulk of the adult education dollars, public libraries tended to limit themselves to the provision of space, collections and, more recently, computers. Lacking the ability to hire the necessary "professional" staff, LLA and LVA designed extensive training programs to prepare the literacy practitioners of their affiliates, usually community-based organizations or CBOs. On the other hand, local educational agencies (LEAs) such as public schools and community colleges have consistency resorted to professional staffers (meaning: people with college degrees) to carry out their adult continuing education duties; in general, staff development here has left a lot to be desired. While literacy staff with college training seem comfortable enough with however much they have already learned in college, the opposite seem to happen with undergrade staff who, for one reason or another, are constantly seeking to take workshops, seminars and the like to compensate for their lack of enough formal training. Consequently, they become the embodiment of lifelong learning more so than the "professional" types who already know all that one needs to know to perform well. To many of these, they got their "education" in college, graduate school and the like. Not surprisingly, they have stopped doing enough learning to be of much help to themselves or anybody. Evidently, they have not yet learned that education is a lifelong process.

The Problem With These Programs

Just like education has meant different things in different stages of the

national development, literacy has also gone through a wide range of phases and thus definitions. More to the point, perhaps, even today one can find in any single region of the country various interpretations for the very concept of literacy. Once it used to be the mere ability to decipher written information; as a matter of fact, this still is the case in many societies around the world. In those milieux, a literate person is anybody who can sign his or her own name and decode information written with low degrees of complexity. The less "primitive" is the environment or society, the more complex tends to be the general understanding of what literacy is . For instance, many grassroots groups in Chicago approach literacy as the ability to read the surrounding world while most literacy volunteer organizations take literacy skills as being something interchangeable merely with word-reading skills. Because there is a difference between reading the word (the Bible, in many circles) and reading the world (job applications, leases, prescriptions, bills, abuses, discriminations, etc.), with all its complexities, turmoils and challenges, it is quite understandable the diversity of the above-indicated concepts or definitions.

In Chicago's South and West Sides, one finds literacy providers, especially CBOs, wanting to prepare people to change their neighborhoods, if not society in general. Most of the literacy providers elsewhere in the city, however, simply try to have their students to change themselves, which incidentally is the position advocated by most donors and funders of literacy programs. Their curricula, materials and methods of instruction tend to be very behaviorist, mechanical or technical. Nonetheless, the average citizen lacking literacy skills in most inner city neighborhoods in Chicago usually sees a more pronounced need for changes in society as a whole than in themselves. Consequently, they tend to distance themselves from these sorts of adult continuing education programs. People that

are bitter at the larger society for one reason or another usually do well in programs harboring similar views on social, cultural, economic and political deficits; they certainly would not want to be part of programs that hold views, values and philosophies too different from theirs.

One of the major problems with publicly-funded programs is their philosophical assumptions. After all, implicitly they tend to hold the individual as the person with all the deficits and, therefore, solely responsible for his or her failures or dysfunctionalities in society. As a result, their high attrition rates should constitute no surprise whatsoever to anybody who has been keeping tab on these issues. Church-based programs, like most literacy volunteer operations, ordinarily end up with those participants who have chosen to see themselves as needing to undergo some or a lot of changes to fit in society, before and after the Messiah's second coming. In between these two extremes -- the need to change society vis-a-vis the need to change the individual -- there are many other educational programs conceptualizing and implementing their views and philosophies of lifelong learning. Their managers do not worry necessarily about being accountable to Caesar or God; instead, they tend to compromise somewhere between the need for personal and social change in order to be accountable to the learners. As it could not be otherwise, their staffers, methods, materials and curricula ordinarily reflect these values, views and praxes.

While church-based educators and education respond to their perceptions or understandings of God's will, Government-funded programs on the other hand are commissioned to carry out the values and views of the State. The major difference between both brands of education programming is the fact that, whereas centering on individual changes, one not only acknowledges societal problems but also a purpose for them while the other simply refuses to admit that there is much wrong

with today's society's economic and political constructs. Therefore, it is up to the individual to change himself or herself to fit in a society defined by "the few" for the many; overall, they suggest, society is pretty much okay as it is. Whether these issues are explicit or not, the reality is that they are reflected not only in the whats but also in the hows of our educational projects, programs and activities. The problem, nonetheless, for these educational designers comes from the fact that too many people in our neighborhoods simply refuse to buy those top-down bodies of opinions, prejudices or, as we put it, knowledge about what is wrong and thus needed to change in society. Both Church-oriented and State-based types of education are excellent to those who are not in conflict with the philosophical underpinnings of those two institutions. A significant number of people throughout our communities, however, would rather have a far different approach: They yearn for projects and programs with which they can have a real relationship. Whatever is removed from their neighborhoods tends to be treated as abstractions which they choose not to grasp or with which to have much of a relationship. This is precisely why it is not easy in these circumstances for many organizations, chiefly those with top-down worldviews, to do program recruitment and retention, even when participation is mandatory.

The more Church simulates the behavior of business enterprises and the more Government is perceived by the hoi polloi as representing the interests of the private sector and the higher castes of society, the more detached both these institutions become from the masses. Instead of helping people, there is the growing perception that these institutions seem to use people for their own causes. On the other hand, the segments of society with the ability to articulate their voices, to organize themselves (locally, regionally and nationally), to break into the printed and electronic media, to internet their voices, to e-mail their thoughts

elsewhere, to press institutions to be accountable to them do not necessarily need others to protect or assist them. After all, they pretty much can fend for themselves. But what about the others, that is, those who have "no manners", who do not know how to command attention, who are unable to use " proper English", who are too loud, too crazy and too lost to make enough sense out of their own reality? Can we as a society afford to continue dismissing them? No, definitely not! It would be societal suicide because too many people fall in those categories these days. Therefore, we can no longer shrug off "their" problems as though these problems were only theirs; whether we realize it or not, they are ours as well and we'd better do something about them.

It is out of this weltanschauung that one starts considering the need for bottom-up or community-based policies, programs and projects. Institutions that are not in tune with the spirit of the neighborhoods, regions or populations that they are supposed to be serving only by chance or accident can come up with programs and projects that make sense to the prospective or potential participant. One needs to be aware that a lot of the policies and programs that make a lot of sense to the bosses, managers, power holders, architects, leaders et al of our society do not necessarily make much or any sense to the general public. For this reason, the average citizen usually stays away from efforts and initiatives that are not designed from the community's standpoint. This explains in part why so many learning centers, community colleges and public schools show attendance problems of all kinds, not to mention attrition and desertion.

The more technology manufacturers succeed in tapping on public dollars, the more handle and control they get on the materials, methods of instruction and curricula of very many programs going all the way from pre-kindergarten (pre-K) to post-doctoral (post-D) education. Ordinarily, high-tech manufacturers and their

representatives learn enough about educational organizations, programs and projects in order to sell whatever products they happen to have in their accounts. This explains why these days a great deal of meeting time in educational institutions is spent reacting to technology-based propositions of one kind or another even when they are not clear enough on their own mission or purpose. Actually, if one is to draw from statements made by their administrators, one could easily start thinking that some of those so-called educational organizations' raisons d'etre was primarily to serve the business community. The more "pragmatical" we become, the more we as a society tend to trade education for something quick and of short-term return known in our circles as training. Education is not only useless but also expensive, we seem to be suggesting.

Training is what most storefront service providers want to sell to remedy us out of our troubles. For one thing, training is clear-cut, to-the-point, cost-effective, easy-to-implement type of operations, holler the apologists of both software and hardware manufacturers. The issue though, is that we can train a dog to retrieve the newspaper from the lawn but we can not educate it to read, or much less write, a newspaper for us. Likewise, in some ways we are left in the larger society with the impression that we are not willing to educate some of our peoples. The best that we can do for those ***have-nots,*** the impression goes, is to train them to retrieve the newspaper from the lawn for the ***haves***. The "untrainable" ones are left with no choice, it seems, but to be jailed up for a societal cost much higher than the tuition that we would pay for education in a decent college or university. In other words, seemingly education is not for everybody; the modern-day equivalent of subhumans are left, it appears, with some training opportunities. Increasingly, a rather smaller fraction of society is getting education which, of course, is expensive and, therefore, not available for everybody. Training-wise, the privileged

castes also get the best high-tech opportunities that money can buy; for them, considering their educational, cultural, economic, social and political background, training is definitely a major asset.

While the growing segments of low-income groups go after each other in urban America with passion, despair and vengeance, those better off move out to suburbia or exurbia: Not only they are physically mobile but also they do not necessarily need to ride or drive to the cities to carry out their daily missions. All in all, they can get on their cars and expressway themselves to their offices or simply telecommunicate their instructions, orders and the like without having to leave their own beds just like Nicholas William Leeson had been doing for so long until he imploded the other day the very bank that was managing England's Queen Elizabeth II's finances. The ***haves*** of this society have managed to empower themselves over public and private resources to such a degree that Government, like everything else, tends to work satisfactorily for them most of the time. Likewise, given their academic, class or cultural background, technology has proven to be excellent means toward their ends. On the other hand, what good does it do for those with no vehicles to have a great speedway available in the area? Not much, evidently. There is no question whatsoever that a highway, superhighway or the like are necessities for those with enough purchasing power to buy, lease or rent vehicles. Administrators of educational institutions, therefore, need to be constantly asking themselves about who their audiences, constituencies or publics are and, consequently, what roles are expected of them. Are they there (a) to respond to the needs of senior executives of high-tech firms, of banking, media, real estate outfits and the like, (b) to respond to the uneducated, underemployed, unemployed, homeless and so forth or (c) to respond to everybody? Who is the actual public of institutions, particularly those bankrolled

by tax-generated dollars? Should the ***haves*** deserve better accountability than the ***have-nots,*** especially from the so-called public servants? Evidently not, unless we are no longer serious about reaching out and retaining a more diverse population in our programs and projects.

Despite their rhetoric or mission statements, most of today's educational initiatives tend to help those that sooner or later would end up helping themselves in one or another way, with or without others' assistance. In fact, most of those interested or attracted to technology fall into such a category. In general, they are or once were skillful readers with enough self-esteem and confidence in themselves not to shy away from learning challenges. In short, they can take care of themselves as far as their learning needs go. Notwithstanding their lack of high school diploma or college degree, very many of them have managed to amass enormous amounts of technical knowledge on rather complex matters, ranging from hardware to software. Anyhow, it seems to me that we, especially those of us working in public institutions, should not worry so much about the provision of lifelong learning services to populations that show advanced degrees of high-tech literacies essentially because they have already mastered the basics of low-tech literacy skills. Given the scarcity of resources, priority must be given to those that are least equipped to succeed in today's society on their own. Shall the car be put in front of the horses and shall we be making computers with their expensive databases available to people who now are unable to read and understand books, magazines and newspapers or shall we go back to the basics first and have people to initiate themselves in the world of pencil, paper, pen, books and the like? We definitely must examine very closely what our priorities are or are going to be for the remaining years of this century, before we start talking about the 21st century.

The Chicago Public Library Literacy Initiative

First, a few words about Chicago, a 2,750,000-plus inhabitants city. In the last two decades alone Chicago has lost about one-half million of people or an entire New Orleans or Denver to its suburbs or exurbs and other states. Its 600-plus public school facilities enroll over 410,000 students who have available to them a public library system with 80-plus neighborhood branches. Although its local community college has nine campuses spread throughout the city in addition to an even larger number of four-year colleges, post-secondary education is not necessarily as popular as one would expect in the inner city. Actually, more than a city, Chicago seems to be a cluster or confederation (Middle Age's style, I am afraid) of cities. Scaringly enough, the local county's jail with its 8,888-plus inmates is too small to accommodate all the many scores of troubled troublemakers that the police pick up in the streets every week.

Victim of segregation along lines such as income, ethnicity, race, language, geography, transportation, gangs and so on, each neighborhood resembles a borough or hamlet in itself. Although juxtaposed to one another, some of its neighborhoods are just as far apart as Seattle and Miami or New York and Los Angeles. Maybe we could afford these societal anomalies in bygone times of abundance but not anymore. From pre-K to post-D we must educate ourselves to do away not only with the physical distances that separate our denizens but also, most importantly, with the academic distances that have been hindering our ability to optimize the use of our limited resources. Without a much better utilization of the dwindling wherewithal that we have available, there is almost no chance that we can dream of a better world for everybody to live. On the other hand, it will be suicidal as a society to continue supporting only the efforts of a few groups in

our milieux while a growing majority out there cries in despair for help. For instance, according to the Illinois State Library, in the Chicagoland area alone there is no less than one million of adults unable to read and comprehend materials written with a degree of complexity at or higher than the ninth grade level. They are, in the Illinois jargon, labeled illiterate adults; they will easily drown, instead of surfing, in the information ocean of the 21st century. Can we afford to lock these 1,000,000-plus individuals out of the necessary basic academic skills to survive in the upcoming information society? Most likely, not! People endure hardships and behave according to the protocols, covenants or laws of the land as long as they can see some sort of long-term compensation for their (good) behavior. Without a sense of hope, they go berserk and then we as a society will have to either institutionalize them all or to literally do away with them just like so many other countries have tried to do in the world. These other countries, however, didn't necessarily proclaim to be as democratic or civilized as ours. Therefore, we must deal with this problem head on.

While gangs are now getting ahead of themselves and actively recruiting even elementary school kids to perform in distinct modalities of underground economies, not many Chicago high schools can retain and graduate even one out of every two of their freshman students. Unprepared to make their ends meet through some sort of career, trade or profession in the above-the-ground economy, those youngsters will be condemned to resort to some sort of underworld or underground economy before long. Skeptical and distrustful of the larger society, they do not have the discipline to wait for long-term rewards. Lacking a sense of tomorrow, they want to see the fruits of their efforts in the very same day that they start investing time and energy toward whatever they settle themselves up to do. They simply cannot wait a year or two to harvest a set of skills, diploma or

passport to a better life; having no faith whatsoever in our values systems, they are waiting no more. They are acting now with their muscles, baseball bats, knives and guns! Because they no longer believe in our tales of social justice, they can not see any wrong in their thinking or action. Sadly enough, a growing number of them perceive life as a nightmare, a torture or some sort of punishment already and they are not necessarily taking it anymore. To an extent, this mindset accounts for many of the repeated acts of violence that we have been hearing lately. Whereas many (upper)-middle-class judges and other gatekeepers of society still consider jail or prison terms as punishment, inner-city young adults see it differently; very many of them, as a matter of fact, feel much safer, better protected and better fed in jail than in their own homes or communities. With no sense of purpose, life becomes meaningless; this scenario makes drug abuse, alcoholism, burglary, suicide and homicide much easier to be understood, incidentally.

It was out of this picture that, almost in its own inception, the Chicago Public Library Literacy Initiative was forced to re-invent itself in order to be of some appeal to underschooled Chicagoans. People with no sense of hope or tomorrow are dangerous to themselves and, consequently, to everybody else. Once despair strikes, these people will not want to buy education from us; education works for people with a strong sense of tomorrow and not for those fraught with hopelessness. Education sounds to them as something too abstract and, thus, too hard to which to relate; community residents want something more concrete, more tangible and real. Therefore, instead of merely buying the official discourse on literacy and approach it as word-reading-skills acquisition, the Chicago Public Library Literacy Initiative decided to focus on world-reading-skills development as a strategy to reach out to the so-called hard-to-reach populations. Ultimately, it wanted to help its participants to understand the social constructs of their

communities. In the wake of such an understanding, people can define what changes they need to do (a) on themselves, (b) on their world and (c) on anything else that they deem necessary, whenever they judged appropriate. In line with this mindset, the Library decided to come up with learning centers where community residents would go for help on whatever issue with which they needed help. Instead of the very structured learning environment with a rather well-defined curriculum, as it is usually the case with LEAs, the literacy staff avail themselves to impart a wide range of basic academic skills. While some students come everyday, others come every now and then. While some bring traffic-related materials, others bring their bibles to be used as some sort of a primer. While some of them stick to the program for the entire year, others seem to be unable to stick with it or stay away for more than a month. Anyhow, the community residents are in charge of their learning experiences here; the literacy staff are merely incidental to the participants' learning which is definitely a lifelong process.

Since its beginnings in the mid-1980s, the Chicago Public Library Literacy Initiative insisted that it does not do much **for** anybody. Rather, it chooses to do a lot of work **with** whoever comes to it. Should it have had unlimited resources, maybe it would be able to pursue a social work mindset and do things for its participants. In view of its tremendous limitations, however, it opted for a partnership of sorts with other providers of community services and, most importantly, with its students. Essentially, the Literacy Initiative functions as a broker of data, skills and information between unskilled and skilled persons, agencies and institutions. For the sake of outreaching, it depends upon not only the 80-plus branch libraries planted throughout the city but also upon a wide set of community organizations and agencies. While relying on these other providers of services to help its participants with skills and information on a broad range of

issues going from housing to health care, from children to senior citizens, from public aid to AIDS, from hunger to anger and so forth, the Literacy Initiative centers on world-reading skills development. Instead of pre-defined curricula as it usually occurs in most literacy programs, its texts, materials, methods and techniques are defined jointly by the groups' instructional leaders and participants.

Because the Literacy Initiative assumes that writing is just another facet, along with reading, of the basic academic skills kaleidoscope, the success of its participants tends to be measured by their ability to express themselves in writing and to "publish" their own works. Therefore, more than merely decodifying or consuming ideas organized by others in a piece of paper, literacy here becomes the ability to also codify letters, phrases, numbers, sentences and paragraphs in order to sell, put forth or communicate to the larger society as much as possible of the participants' views, values or whims. In short, this has been the way we have chosen to transform ourselves and others in our surroundings. Participants' roles are much more akin to knowledge producers than to the traditional ones of consumers of somebody else's knowledge.

Given the endless string of matters hollering in our ears for reforms, changes and transformations, our participants are led to realize the need for a continuing or lifelong process of learning in this rather dynamic and ever-changing world of ours. After all, without learning, only by chance intelligent action happens and to leave to chance the kinds of changes, reforms and transformations that we, our peers and the world are calling for would be simply irresponsible. If those that are better-off in society do not trust their future and fate to anybody else, why should the downtrodden or wretched of earth do so? Either we educate and train ourselves to be our own masters and the masters of our own neighborhoods or we just learn to resign to our short-, middle- and long-term misery because those

currently in charge of the universe are not about to loosen up their paws from our necks and relinquish their power over our lives.

In the final analysis, power is that kind of commodity that is always priceless; in other words, whoever has it does not give, lease or sell it away, unless they are unbalanced or suicidal. To negotiate our statuses in this world with the powers-that-be, we must learn to master the fundamentals of power, therefore, and this is not the kind of thing that a quick training will suffice. Rather, it is a matter of a lifetime hunting, search or pursuit. Therefore, whether we realize it or not, lifelong learning must be part of the infrastructure, substructure, structure, interstructure, intrastructure, metastructure, overstructure and superstructure of any society that wishes to call itself enlightened, sound, fair, humane and not self-destructive. Public libraries present themselves theoretically as the ideal providers of literacy, post-literacy and lifelong learning opportunities for the general public due to the fact that they welcome all age brackets, contrarily to public schools and (community) colleges that focus on children and young adults, respectively. Instead of capitalizing on the identification, storage and retrieval of data and information generated primarily by society's intelligentsia, library professionals must learn to do the same with data and information stemming from other quarters of society, however. To excuse oneself behind the label of objectivity, impartiality or professionalism is to continue the elitist tradition of serving the powers-that-be of our times.

In today's world there are not many excuses not to have in our shelves the views and voices of those who couldn't write a book. After all, there is a proliferation of multi-media learning centers that can easily capture images and voices together. Moreover, too many of those writing books do not have much more to say than what has already been said before, anyway. Therefore, why

should we support their "data and information businesses" by buying their products with our scarce tax dollars? It seems that library professionals could explore ways to also collect data and information formulated by those who still lack high-level literacy skills. To dismiss people's worldviews just because they happen to use different forms of expression and different media of communication definitely does not seem an intelligent professional behavior from those working with data and information. Whose data and information are we collecting, after all? Shall we allow the form to dictate the content and continue ignoring whatever is not ciphered in a database, diskette, book, journal, magazine, newspaper, photo, filmstrip, videocassette or the like? Be this as it may, if public libraries are to represent the general public's interests we still have a very long way to go. It seems that to be mindlessly ordering essentially from whatever the big publishing houses or high-tech outfits advertise is not necessarily the best way to serve a public library's public. If these libraries are to be truly deserving of the label of educational institutions, they definitely need to do a lot more than what they have been doing in such a field of work and study, it appears. Otherwise, they run the risk of being categorized very soon as business institutions about to be snatched away from the public by the highest bidders. Now, can we as a democratic society afford such a risk? Most certainly not and this is precisely why we must get busy with our research work.

The more programs, services and fixtures of public libraries are granted to for-profit business operators, the more the public of the public library will change. Efficiency and effectiveness then will be directly related to the proportion of high-paying patrons, customers and clients. In short, there is the need to find out who is the public library's public that today's library is actually serving vis-a-vis the one to whom its mission claims to be of service. All things considered, the whats

and hows of public libraries tend to define rather well their whoms. Consequently, these are some of the twentieth century issues that public library professionals may need to be considering for the time being.

Recommendations

Assuming that research is the pursuit of the "truths", facts of life or whatever works in a particular field of study or discipline, it is obvious that we are in need of great deal of research work in the areas of post-secondary education, libraries and lifelong learning. In the for-profit world, the company that waits around for research to be developed by others in the market may not last long enough to read any research findings, provided that such a finding will become available soon enough. In the not-for-profit world a similar culture or approach need to be considered: Every organization that is serious enough about its mission must engage itself in continuing research and development exercises. Instead of buying canned prescriptions or recommendations drawn out of somebody else's reality and thus research experience, maybe we all need to get in the mode of constantly searching for new, more efficient and effective ways of doing what we do. After all, no practitioner can really be proficient unless he or she is endlessly searching for better ways of carrying out their duties. Why can't we then have these practitioners to document their searches and researches in such a way that others elsewhere can perhaps benefit from their work because, after all contrary to what is the case in the for-profit world, there is no reason for secrecy here.

All things considered, NIPELLL perhaps could suggest that the recipients of post-secondary education, libraries and lifelong learning dollars start taking initiative and learning to update themselves in a more systematic, consistent and

regular fashion instead of doing the very same old stuff, as prescribed by the conventional body of knowledge developed by some scholars in some universities or research institutes somewhere in the country. Since nowhere is written that research in post-secondary, library and lifelong learning matters is a monopoly of any particular group of scholars, practitioners in these fields need to get started with their own research projects. Since research is a necessary requirement for the delivery of quality services, organizations that do not feel fit, comfortable or equipped enough to conduct research work in order to improve their praxes must be encouraged to establish partnerships with research-prone institutions, chiefly universities and research institutes. The current status of adult education and lifelong learning practice in Chicago and anywhere else, it seems, is so rudimentary, however, that even the research of our own practitioners can improve the whats and hows of what we have been doing. We must, however, take more responsibility for the way we do what we do.

Historically in this country education theory has been conceptualized by scholars and researchers with very little sense of accountability to low-income communities both in urban and rural America. Their knowledge, if any, of these have usually been the outcome of some cursory field trips, library readings and the like. Their brand of university-based, top-down or LEA-inspired education unfortunately has always been at odds with bottom-up, community-based educational efforts. For this reason, NIPELLL can definitely make a difference in assisting providers of post-secondary, libraries and lifelong learning services to move toward more collaborative, participatory or emancipative research modes. Such an encouragement would prompt funders and donors to be more open regarding those institutions concerned with the current processes of doing research work. Even though university-based and government-based researchers tend to lack

the preparation to carry out participatory or community-based education, those are the ones usually doing both the talking and the writing on those matters. Therefore, NIPELLL can certainly help change this picture by providing community-based educators with the same perks, privileges and resources that traditional scholars and conventional researchers have, which is a lot of time to read and write. Typically, community-based educators are overworked and grossly underpaid, when they are lucky enough to have jobs. After all, there is not a climate at this moment in this country much welcoming of bottom-up or community-based initiatives in the field of both formal and informal. Since " professional" educators have, through their LEAs, proven to be off target so many times before, this scenario calls for a change, and NIPELLL may very well be able to assist in such a process. Periodically, some sort of conferences, summer institutes, symposia, colloquia or the like could be organized for these research-minded practitioners to share their praxes. The more handle we get on the way we do what we do in these fields, the easier it will become to design a (quarterly, semesterly, annually, etc.) publication whose main purpose would be to challenge others to do better than what they have been doing. All in all, a career without a challenge is no different than a life without a challenge -- dull and boring. I am certain that nobody wants this sort of things in our profession. In addition, it would be great to think of some sort of NIPELLL-sponsored sabbaticals, fellowships, internships or the like to promote more opportunities for practitioners to learn with and from one another, if we are really serious about bottom-up or community-inspired modes of lifelong learning throughout this rather multi-cultural society. On-going dialogue and communication among practitioners has been one of the characteristics of dynamic and ever-changing fields of work and study ; after all, bodies of knowledge do not grow rapidly enough without a consistent

cross-fertilization or exchange of ideas and praxes among practitioners and researchers toiling in post-secondary education, libraries and lifelong learning arenas. In short, at this point these are the views of a Chicago-based library literacy practitioner.

NOTE: These tentative remarks and observations stemmed from two gatherings with Chicago Public Library Literacy Initiative staffers plus four in-depth interviews with nine associates of Chicago's Southside Literacy Coalition, Westside Literacy Coalition, Northside Literacy and the Hispanic Literacy Council in the month of February and March, 1995. Instead of predefined questions, these interviews characterized themselves by broad issues such as community-based education, public libraries, local educational agencies or LEAs, community-based organizations or CBOs, public libraries, literacy, lifelong learning, post-secondary education, training, research, universities, professors, teachers, tutors, volunteers, students, learners, program participants, materials, methods and techniques. The interviewees were asked to pick and choose the topics about which they could speak for about one hour. The views represented here, however, are not necessarily subscribed in their totality by any of the above-indicated individuals or entities. At best, they reflect the author's current stage of reflection on the challenge of learning to (un)learn for a better life. For further information, please, do not hesitate to contact Elio DeArrudah at the Chicago Public Library Literacy Initiative through (312) 747-4162 or (312) 747-4089.